

THE BALLAD OF
READING GAOL



OSCAR WILDE

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1907



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The Ballad of Reading
Gaol



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*Oscar
Wilde*

New York
Dodge Publishing Company
214-220 East 23d Street

PR 5818
B2
1907

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IN MEMORIAM

C. T. W.

SOMETIME TROOPER OF THE ROYAL
HORSE GUARDS

OBIIT

H. M. PRISON, READING, BERKSHIRE,

JULY 7, 1896

Introduction

BORN in Dublin October 16, 1854, Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde, the second son of Sir William Wilde, the noted Irish oculist, and Jane Francesca Elgee, the well-known pamphleteer and poet, received his early education at Enniskellen and Trinity College. He then entered Oxford, graduating in 1878, and winning the Newdigate Prize for English Verse with his poem "Ravenna." During the next five years he became known

in London as the Apostle of the Æsthetic movement and through his affected dress and mannerism was widely caricatured by *Punch* and satirized in Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera "Patience." In 1881 a volume of his poems was published. In 1882 he lectured on art in the United States, and it might be said in passing that much of the present-day interest in Japanese art can be traced to his influence exerted at this time. In 1884 he married Constance Lloyd. The total amount of his published work from 1884 to 1891 was small, consisting principally of "The Happy Prince and Other Tales" 1888, "The Soul of Man under Socialism" which appeared originally in the *Fortnightly*

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Review for February 1, 1891, "The Picture of Dorian Gray" 1891, "A House of Pomegranates" 1891, "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories" 1891, and "Intentions" 1891, a volume of essays which had already appeared in various magazines. From October, 1887, to September, 1889, he was editor of the *Woman's World*, his personal contributions to the magazine mostly appearing under the title of "Some Literary Notes." Early in 1892 his play, "Lady Windermere's Fan," was produced, followed the next year by "A Woman of No Importance" and in 1895 by "An Ideal Husband" and "The Importance of Being Earnest," — all meeting with extraordinary success and stamping Oscar

Wilde as one of the foremost dramatists of the day. It was during these years of his great success that he spent much of his time in France, and "Salome," written in French in 1892, was published in Paris the next year. In 1894 an English translation appeared, but the play was not produced until 1896. In April, 1895, two months after the production of "The Importance of Being Earnest," came his downfall, and on May 25th he was sentenced to two years at hard labour. It has since been proved that he was really the scapegoat of a circle of his friends. The only work written while in prison, originally a long letter to his friend Robert Ross, was published in 1905 under the title of "De

Introduction ❀

Profundis ” and shows the great change that came over the man while serving his sentence. An account of the poet while in prison, written by one of the wardens and originally published in Sherard’s “ Life of Oscar Wilde,” is appended to this volume. Upon his release from gaol in 1897 he went to Berneval, a small village on the French sea-coast to the northeast of Dieppe, where a house had been taken for him. He had assumed the name of Sebastian Melmoth and his immediate purpose was to live there in retirement, giving himself up to work, — the actual output, however, was small. Later he went to Italy for a short time and from thence to Paris, where he died on November 30, 1900, almost de-

✱ Introduction

serted by his friends and in comparative poverty.

It was only when neglected and despised, ill and miserable, that sincere feeling bred in Oscar Wilde his one great poem, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol." "I have sworn solemnly to dedicate my life to Tragedy. If I write any more books it will be to form a library of lamentation. They will be written in a style begotten of sorrow and in sentences composed in solitude and punctuated by tears. They will be written exclusively for those who have suffered or are suffering. I understand them and they will understand me. I shall be an enigma to the world of Pleasure and a mouth-

Introduction ❀

piece for the world of Pain " — thus spoke Oscar Wilde while still in prison. In the three years and a half from his release until his death he wrote but three things, " The Case of Warder Martin," " Don't Read This if You Want to be Happy To-day," both pleas for prison reform appearing in the shape of letters written to the London *Daily Chronicle*, and thirdly " The Ballad of Reading Gaol," published early in 1898. The genesis of the poem is fraught with tragic interest. It is dedicated to the memory of one Woolridge or Wolredge, a trooper in the Royal Horse Guards, who during a carousal of drunkenness and dissipation murdered his wife. For the crime he was hanged at Reading Gaol

July 7, 1896. Throughout, the poem is a concentrated tragedy. The haunting fear, the utter hopelessness, the wistful eye turned

“ Upon that little tent of blue
Which prisoners call the sky,” —

all is burned in the memory; the miserable sensations of the condemned felon are communicated to the reader's mind in all their gruesome intensity. Its like can be found only in such Russian novels of the materialistic school as “ Crime and Punishment ” of Dostoevski's, while certain passages by reason of their terrible tragic intensity have been placed on a level with some of the descriptions in Dante's

Introduction ❀

Inferno, only “ The Ballad of Reading Gaol ” is so much more infinitely human. — The whole is as awful as the pages of Sophocles.

The Ballad of Reading Gaol

I

HE did not wear his scarlet coat,
For blood and wine are red,
And blood and wine were on his hands
When they found him with the
dead,
The poor dead woman whom he loved,
And murdered in her bed.

He walked amongst the Trial Men
In a suit of shabby gray;
A cricket cap was on his head,
And his step seemed light and gay;

❧ The Ballad of

But I never saw a man who looked
So wistfully at the day.

I never saw a man who looked
With such a wistful eye
Upon that little tent of blue
Which prisoners call the sky,
And at every drifting cloud that went
With sails of silver by.

I walked, with other souls in pain,
Within another ring,
And was wondering if the man had done
A great or little thing,
When a voice behind me whispered low,
“*That fellow’s got to swing.*”

Dear Christ! the very prison walls
Suddenly seemed to reel,

Reading Gaol ❧

And the sky above my head became
Like a casque of scorching steel;
And, though I was a soul in pain,
My pain I could not feel.

I only knew what hunted thought
Quickened his step, and why
He looked upon the garish day
With such a wistful eye;
The man had killed the thing he loved,
And so he had to die.

Yet each man kills the thing **he**
loves,
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!

❖ The Ballad of

Some kill their love when they are
young,

And some when they are old;

Some strangle with the hands of
Lust,

Some with the hands of Gold:

The kindest use a knife, because

The dead so soon grow cold.

Some love too little, some too long,

Some sell, and others buy;

Some do the deed with many tears,

And some without a sigh:

For each man kills the thing he
loves,

Yet each man does not die.

He does not die a death of shame

On a day of dark disgrace,

Reading Gaol ❀

Nor have a noose about his neck,
Nor a cloth upon his face,
Nor drop feet foremost through **the**
floor
Into an empty space.

He does not sit with silent men
Who watch him night and day;
Who watch him when he tries to weep,
And when he tries to pray;
Who watch him lest himself should
rob
The prison of its prey.

He does not wake at dawn to see
Dread figures throng his room,
The shivering Chaplain robed **in**
white,
The Sheriff stern with gloom,

✻ The Ballad of

And the Governor all in shiny black,
With the yellow face of Doom.

He does not rise in piteous haste
To put on convict-clothes,
While some coarse-mouthed Doctor
gloats, and notes
Each new and nerve-twitched pose,
Fingering a watch whose little ticks
Are like horrible hammer-blows.

He does not know that sickening thirst
That sands one's throat, before
The hangman with his gardener's gloves
Slips through the padded door,
And binds one with three leathern
thongs,
That the throat may thirst no
more.

Reading Gaol ❧

He does not bend his head to hear
The Burial Office read,
Nor, while the terror of his soul
Tells him he is not dead,
Cross his own coffin, as he moves
Into the hideous shed.

He does not stare upon the air
Through a little roof of glass:
He does not pray with lips of clay
For his agony to pass;
Nor feel upon his shuddering cheek
The kiss of Caiaphas.

II

Six weeks our guardsman walked the
yard,
In the suit of shabby gray:

❧ The Ballad of

His cricket cap was on his head,
And his step seemed light and gay,
But I never saw a man who looked
So wistfully at the day.

I never saw a man who looked
With such a wistful eye
Upon that little tent of blue
Which prisoners call the sky,
And at every wandering cloud that
trailed
Its ravelled fleeces by.

He did not wring his hands, as do
Those witless men who dare
To try to rear the changeling Hope
In the cave of black Despair:
He only looked upon the sun,
And drank the morning air.

Reading Gaol ❧

He did not wring his hands nor weep,
Nor did he peek or pine,
But he drank the air as though it
held

Some healthful anodyne;
With open mouth he drank the sun
As though it had been wine!

And I and all the souls in pain,
Who tramped the other ring,
Forgot if we ourselves had done
A great or little thing,
And watched with gaze of dull amaze
The man who had to swing.

And strange it was to see him pass
With a step so light and gay,
And strange it was to see him look
So wistfully at the day,

❧ The Ballad of

And strange it was to think that he
Had such a debt to pay.

For oak and elm have pleasant leaves
That in the spring-time shoot:
But grim to see is the gallows-tree,
With its adder-bitten root,
And, green or dry, a man must die
Before it bears its fruit!

The loftiest place is that seat of grace
For which all worldlings try:
But who would stand in hempen band
Upon a scaffold high,
And through a murderer's collar take
His last look at the sky?

It is sweet to dance to violins
When Love and Life are fair:

Reading Gaol ❧

To dance to flutes, to dance to lutes
Is delicate and rare:
But it is not sweet with nimble feet
To dance upon the air!

So with curious eyes and sick sur-
mise

We watched him day by day,
And wondered if each one of us
Would end the self-same way,
For none can tell to what red Hell
His sightless soul may stray.

At last the dead man walked no more
Amongst the Trial Men,
And I knew that he was standing up
In the black dock's dreadful pen,
And that never would I see his face
In God's sweet world again.

✻ The Ballad of

Like two doomed ships that pass in
storm

We had crossed each other's way:
But we made no sign, we said no word,
We had no word to say;
For we did not meet in the holy night,
But in the shameful day.

A prison wall was round us both,
Two outcast men we were:
The world had thrust us from its heart,
And God from out His care:
And the iron gin that waits for Sin
Had caught us in its snare.

III

IN Debtors' Yard the stones are hard,
And the dripping wall is high,

Reading Gaol ❧

So it was there he took the air
Beneath the leaden sky,
And by each side a Warder walked,
For fear the man might die.

Or else he sat with those who
watched
His anguish night and day;
Who watched him when he rose to
weep,
And when he crouched to pray;
Who watched him lest himself should
rob
Their scaffold of its prey.

The Governor was strong upon
The Regulations Act:
The Doctor said that Death was but
A scientific fact:

❧ The Ballad of

And twice a day the Chaplain called,
And left a little tract.

And twice a day he smoked his pipe,
And drank his quart of beer:
His soul was resolute, and held
No hiding-place for fear;
He often said that he was glad
The hangman's hands were near.

But why he said so strange a thing
No Warder dared to ask:
For he to whom a watcher's doom
Is given as his task,
Must set a lock upon his lips,
And make his face a mask.

Or else he might be moved, and try
To comfort or console:

Reading Gaol ❀

And what should Human Pity do
Pent up in Murderers' Hole?
What word of grace in such a
place
Could help a brother's soul?

With slouch and swing around the
ring
We trod the Fools' Parade!
We did not care: we knew we were
The Devil's Own Brigade:
And shaven head and feet of lead
Make a merry masquerade.

We tore the tarry rope to shreds
With blunt and bleeding nails;
We rubbed the doors, and scrubbed
the floors,
And cleaned the shining rails:

✱ The Ballad of

And, rank by rank, we soaped the
plank,

And clattered with the pails.

We sewed the sacks, we broke the
stones,

We turned the dusty drill:

We banged the tins, and bawled the
hymns,

And sweated on the mill:

But in the heart of every man

Terror was lying still.

So still it lay that every day

Crawled like a weed-clogged wave:

And we forgot the bitter lot

That waits for fool and knave,

Till once, as we tramped in from work,

We passed an open grave.

Reading Gaol ❧

With yawning mouth the yellow hole
Gaped for a living thing;
The very mud cried out for blood
To the thirsty asphalte ring:
And we knew that ere one dawn grew
fair
Some prisoner had to swing.

Right in we went, with soul intent
On Death and Dread and Doom:
The hangman, with his little bag,
Went shuffling through the gloom:
And each man trembled as he crept
Into his numbered tomb.

That night the empty corridors
Were full of forms of Fear,
And up and down the iron town
Stole feet we could not hear.

❖ The Ballad of

And through the bars that hide the
stars

White faces seemed to peer.

He lay as one who lies and dreams

In a pleasant meadow-land,

The watchers watched him as he
slept,

And could not understand

How one could sleep so sweet a
sleep

With a hangman close at hand.

But there is no sleep when men must
weep

Who never yet have wept:

So we — the fool, the fraud, the
knave —

That endless vigil kept,

Reading Gaol ❀

And through each brain on hands of
pain
Another's terror crept.

Alas! it is a fearful thing
To feel another's guilt!
For, right within, the sword of Sin
Pierced to its poisoned hilt,
And as molten lead were the tears we
shed
For the blood we had not spilt.

The Warders with their shoes of felt
Crept by each padlocked door,
And peeped and saw, with eyes of
awe,
Gray figures on the floor,
And wondered why men knelt to pray
Who never prayed before.

❧ The Ballad of

All through the night we knelt and
prayed,

Mad mourners of a corse!

The troubled plumes of midnight
were

The plumes upon a hearse:

And bitter wine upon a sponge

Was the savour of Remorse.

The gray cock crew, the red cock crew,
But never came the day:

And crooked shapes of Terror crouched,

In the corners where we lay:

And each evil sprite that walks by
night

Before us seemed to play.

They glided past, they glided fast,

Like travellers through a mist:

Reading Gaol ❧

They mocked the moon in a rigadoon
Of delicate turn and twist,
And with formal pace and loathsome
grace
The phantoms kept their tryst.

With mop and mow, we saw them go,
Slim shadows hand in hand:
About, about, in ghostly rout
They trod a saraband:
And the damned grotesques made arabesques
Like the wind upon the sand!

With the pirouettes of marionettes,
They tripped on pointed tread:
But with flutes of Fear they filled the
ear,
As their grisly masque they led,

✻ The Ballad of

And loud they sang, and long they
sang,
For they sang to wake the dead.

“Oho!” they cried, “*The world is
wide,
But fettered limbs go lame!
And once, or twice, to throw the dice
Is a gentlemanly game,
But he does not win who plays with Sin
In the secret House of Shame.*”

No things of air these antics were,
That frolicked with such glee:
To men whose lives were held in gyves,
And whose feet might not go free,
Ah! wounds of Christ! they were
living things,
Most terrible to see.

Reading Gaol ❧

Around, around, they waltzed and
wound;

Some wheeled in smirking pairs;
With the mincing step of a demirep
Some sidled up the stairs:
And with subtle sneer, and fawning leer,
Each helped us at our prayers.

The morning wind began to moan,
But still the night went on:
Through its giant loom the web of
gloom
Crept till each thread was spun:
And, as we prayed, we grew afraid
Of the Justice of the Sun.

The moaning wind went wandering
round
The weeping prison wall:

✻ The Ballad of

Till like a wheel of turning steel
We felt the minutes crawl:
O moaning wind! what had we done
To have such a seneschal?

At last I saw the shadowed bars,
Like a lattice wrought in lead,
Move right across the whitewashed
wall
That faced my three-plank bed,
And I knew that somewhere in the
world
God's dreadful dawn was red.

At six o'clock we cleaned our cells,
At seven all was still,
But the sough and swing of a mighty
wing
The prison seemed to fill,

Reading Gaol ❧

For the Lord of Death with icy breath
Had entered in to kill.

He did not pass in purple pomp,
Nor ride a moon-white steed.

Three yards of cord and a sliding
board

Are all the gallows need:
So with rope of shame the Herald
came
To do the secret deed.

We were as men who through a
fen

Of filthy darkness grope:
We did not dare to breathe a prayer,
Or to give our anguish scope:
Something was dead in each of us,
And what was dead was Hope.

✻ The Ballad of

For Man's grim Justice goes its way,
And will not swerve aside:
It slays the weak, it slays the strong,
It has a deadly stride:
With iron heel it slays the strong,
The monstrous parricide!

We waited for the stroke of eight:
Each tongue was thick with thirst:
For the stroke of eight is the stroke of
Fate
That makes a man accursed,
And Fate will use a running noose
For the best man and the worst.

We had no other thing to do,
Save to wait for the sign to come:
So, like things of stone in a valley lone,
Quiet we sat and dumb:

Reading Gaol ❀

But each man's heart beat thick and
quick

Like a madman on a drum!

With sudden shock the prison-clock

Smote on the shivering air,

And from all the gaol rose up a wail

Of impotent despair,

Like the sound that frightened marshes

hear

From some leper in his lair.

And as one sees most fearful things

In the crystal of a dream,

We saw the greasy hempen rope

Hooked to the blackened beam,

And heard the prayer the hangman's

snare

Strangled into a scream.

❧ The Ballad of

And all the woe that moved him so
That he gave that bitter cry,
And the wild regrets, and the bloody
sweats,
None knew so well as I:
For he who lives more lives than one
More deaths than one must die.

IV

THERE is no chapel on the day
On which they hang a man:
The Chaplain's heart is far too sick.
Or his face is far too wan,
Or there is that written in his eyes
Which none should look upon.

So they kept us close till nigh on noon,
And then they rang the bell,

Reading Gaol ❧

And the Warders with their jingling
keys

Opened each listening cell,
And down the iron stair we tramped,
Each from his separate Hell.

Out into God's sweet air we went,
But not in wonted way,
For this man's face was white with fear,
And that man's face was gray,
And I never saw sad men who looked
So wistfully at the day.

I never saw sad men who looked
With such a wistful eye
Upon that little tent of blue
We prisoners called the sky,
And at every careless cloud that passed
In happy freedom by.

✻ The Ballad of

But there were those amongst us all
Who walked with downcast head,
And knew that, had each got his due,
They should have died instead:
He had but killed a thing that lived,
Whilst they had killed the dead.

For he who sins a second time
Wakes a dead soul to pain,
And draws it from its spotted shroud,
And makes it bleed again,
And makes it bleed great gouts of
blood,
And makes it bleed in vain!

Like ape or clown, in monstrous garb
With crooked arrows starred,
Silently we went round and round
The slippery asphalte yard;

Reading Gaol ❧

Silently we went round and round,
And no man spoke a word.

Silently we went round and round,
And through each hollow mind
The Memory of dreadful things
Rushed like a dreadful wind,
And Horror stalked before each man,
And Terror crept behind.

The Warders strutted up and down,
And kept their herd of brutes,
Their uniforms were spick and span,
And they wore their Sunday suits,
But we knew the work they had been at,
By the quicklime on their boots.

For where a grave had opened wide,
There was no grave at all:

❧ The Ballad of

Only a stretch of mud and sand
By the hideous prison wall,
And a little heap of burning lime,
That the man should have his pall.

For he has a pall, this wretched
man,
Such as few men can claim:
Deep down below a prison-yard,
Naked for greater shame,
He lies, with fetters on each foot,
Wrapt in a sheet of flame!

And all the while the burning lime
Eats flesh and bone away,
It eats the brittle bone by night,
And the soft flesh by day,
It eats the flesh and bone by turns,
But it eats the heart away.

Reading Gaol ❧

For three long years they will not
sow

Or root or seedling there:
For three long years the unblessed spot
Will sterile be and bare,
And look upon the wondering sky
With unreproachful stare.

They think a murderer's heart would
taint

Each simple seed they sow.
It is not true! God's kindly earth
Is kindlier than men know,
And the red rose would but blow more
red,
The white rose whiter blow.

Out of his mouth a red, red rose
Out of his heart a white!

❖ The Ballad of

For who can say by what strange
way,

Christ brings His will to light,
Since the barren staff the pilgrim bore
Bloomed in the great Pope's sight?

But neither milk-white rose nor red
May bloom in prison air;
The shard, the pebble, and the flint,
Are what they give us there:
For flowers have been known to
heal
A common man's despair.

So never will wine-red rose or white,
Petal by petal, fall
On that stretch of mud and sand that
lies
By the hideous prison wall,

Reading Gaol ❧

To tell the men who tramp the yard
That God's Son died for all.

Yet though the hideous prison wall
Still hems him round and round,
And a spirit may not walk by night
That is with fetters bound,
And a spirit may but weep that lies
In such unholy ground,

He is at peace — this wretched man —
At peace, or will be soon:
There is no thing to make him mad,
Nor does Terror walk at noon,
For the lampless Earth in which he lies
Has neither Sun nor Moon.

They hanged him as a beast is hanged:
They did not even toll

✻ The Ballad of

A requiem that might have brought
Rest to his startled soul,
But hurriedly they took him out,
And hid him in a hole.

They stripped him of his canvas clothes,
And gave him to the flies:
They mocked the swollen purple throat,
And the stark and staring eyes:
And with laughter loud they heaped the
shroud
In which their convict lies.

The Chaplain would not kneel to pray
By his dishonoured grave:
Nor mark it with that blessed Cross
That Christ for sinners gave,
Because the man was one of those
Whom Christ came down to save.

Reading Gaol ❧

Yet all is well; he has but passed
To Life's appointed bourne:
And alien tears will fill for him
Pity's long-broken urn,
For his mourners will be outcast
men,
And outcasts always mourn.

V

I KNOW not whether Laws be right,
Or whether Laws be wrong;
All that we know who lie in gaol
Is that the wall is strong;
And that each day is like a year,
A year whose days are long.

But this I know, that every Law
That men have made for Man,

❧ The Ballad of

Since first Man took his brother's
 life,
 And the sad world began,
But straws the wheat and saves the
 chaff
 With a most evil fan.

This too I know — and wise it were
 If each could know the same —
That every prison that men build
 Is built with bricks of shame,
And bound with bars lest Christ should
 see
 How men their brothers main.

With bars they blur the gracious moon,
 And blind the goodly sun:
And they do well to hide their Hell,
 For in it things are done

Reading Gaol ❧

That Son of God nor son of Man
Ever should look upon !

The vilest deeds like poison weeds
Bloom well in prison-air :
It is only what is good in Man
That wastes and withers there :
Pale Anguish keeps the heavy gate,
And the Warder is Despair.

For they starve the little frightened
child
Till it weeps both night and day :
And they scourge the weak, and flog
the fool,
And gibe the old and gray,
And some grow mad, and all grow
bad,
And none a word may say.

❧ The Ballad of

Each narrow cell in which we dwell
Is a foul and dark latrine,
And the fetid breath of living Death
Chokes up each grated screen,
And all, but Lust, is turned to dust
In Humanity's machine.

The brackish water that we drink
Creeps with a loathsome slime,
And the bitter bread they weigh in
scales
Is full of chalk and lime,
And Sleep will not lie down, but
walks
Wild-eyed, and cries to Time.

But though lean Hunger and green
Thirst
Like asp with adder fight,

Reading Gaol ❀

We have little care of prison fare,
For what chills and kills outright
Is that every stone one lifts by day
Becomes one's heart by night.

With midnight always in one's heart,
And twilight in one's cell,
We turn the crank, or tear the rope,
Each in his separate Hell,
And the silence is more awful far
Than the sound of a brazen bell.

And never a human voice comes near
To speak a gentle word:
And the eye that watches through the
door
Is pitiless and hard:
And by all forgot, we rot and **rot**,
With soul and body marred.

✻ The Ballad of

And thus we rust Life's iron chain
Degraded and alone:
And some men curse, and some men
weep,
And some men make no moan:
But God's eternal Laws are kind
And break the heart of stone.

And every human heart that breaks,
In prison-cell or yard,
Is as that broken box that gave
Its treasure to the Lord,
And filled the unclean leper's
house
With the scent of costliest nard.

Ah! happy they whose hearts can
break
And peace of pardon win!

Reading Gaol ❧

How else may man make straight his
plan

And cleanse his soul from Sin?

How else but through a broken heart

May Lord Christ enter in?

And he of the swollen purple throat,

And the stark and staring eyes,

Waits for the holy hands that took

The Thief to Paradise;

And a broken and a contrite heart

The Lord will not despise.

The man in red who reads the Law

Gave him three weeks of life,

Three little weeks in which to heal

His soul of his soul's strife,

And cleanse from every blot of blood

The hand that held the knife.

❖ The Ballad of

And with tears of blood he cleansed the
hand,
The hand that held the steel:
For only blood can wipe out blood,
And only tears can heal:
And the crimson stain that was of Cain
Became Christ's snow-white seal.

VI

IN Reading gaol by Reading town
There is a pit of shame,
And in it lies a wretched man
Eaten by teeth of flame,
In a burning winding-sheet he lies,
And his grave has got no name.

And there, till Christ call forth the dead
In silence let him lie

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No need to waste the foolish tear,
Or heave the windy sigh :
The man had killed the thing he loved,
And so he had to die.

And all men kill the thing they love,
By all let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword !
C. 3. 3.

THE END.

The Poet in Prison

The Poet in Prison*

(Written by one of the warders in Reading Gaol.)

There are supreme moments in the lives of men, as there are events in the

* This chapter has been contributed to this biography ("Life of Oscar Wilde," by R. H. Sherard, 1906) by a man who was a warder in Reading Gaol at the time of Oscar Wilde's imprisonment there. The express condition under which it was contributed was that it should be printed exactly as it stood in the manuscript, with no alteration of a single phrase or word or expression. This condition has been faithfully observed, and the chapter has been printed as it was written. (The same rule has been followed in reprinting the article for this edition of "The Ballad of Reading Gaol."—Ed.)

histories of nations, which mark epochs and stand out in bold relief from the many others which go to make up the sum-total of their existence. Those moments in the life of Mr. Wilde were when he stepped out of the dock at the Old Bailey, a ruined man, and with a sentence of two years' imprisonment hanging over his unfortunate head.

There are days, months, and years in the lives of some men which to them are an eternity; for them the hand of Time has ceased to move; the clock no longer strikes the recurring hour; for them there is no dawn; there is no day — occasionally, perhaps, a twilight, for, as the adage has it, “Hope springs eternal in the

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human breast;” — they live through one long, bewildering night — a night of terror, a night of appalling darkness, unrelieved by a single star; a night of misery, a night of despair!

Two years' imprisonment meant to the Poet one long, dreary night — a night spent in an Inferno, a night without variation, a night without dreams: no dreams, but nightmares, rendered the more ghastly because of their terrible reality. — From them there was no awakening. — Nightmares wherein men were flogged! wherein men were executed!

Others, it may be urged, have been in prison before the Poet; others since and others now. Ah, yes! but they were not poets, they are not poets, in

the sense he was. Their sufferings, no doubt, are great, but his were greater. Reared in the lap of luxury, living in an atmosphere of culture and refinement, he, the Apostle of Æstheticism, was suddenly hurled from the proud pinnacle on which his genius had placed him, and, without passing through any intermediate stage, found himself encased amid walls of iron and surrounded by bars of steel. He who formerly devoted himself to the producing of the highest works of Art, was now shredding tarred ropes in a dismal cell. He, with a poet's weakness for adornment, was now attired in the garb of gloomy grey, taken from a prison wardrobe. He, to whom expression was life — nay,

more than life itself — was suddenly reduced to a silence more silent than the grave; and he who had made a name, glorious in the world of literature, had now only a number. His was worse than suffering; his was a tragedy, and one of the greatest that the nineteenth century has to record.

For the first eighteen months of his imprisonment all the rigours of the system were applied to him relentlessly. He had to pick his quantity of oakum, or bear the punishment that was sure to follow; turn the monotonous crank, along with his fellows, by which the prison was supplied with water; read the silly books from the library, or pace his cell, a prey to his own sad thoughts, until his health

broke down under the unnatural strain, and, to prevent his being sent to a madhouse, he was allowed the privilege of having a limited number of books, which were sent by friends, and which afterwards found a place amongst others less abstruse on the shelves of the prison library.

Later he was allowed a more important privilege — the privilege of writing — and to this concession the world owes “De Profundis.” He wrote mostly in the evenings, when he knew he would be undisturbed. In his cell were two wooden trestles, across which he placed his plank bed. This was his table, and, as he himself observed: “It was a very good table, too.”

His tins he kept scrupulously clean; and in the mornings, after he had arranged them in their regulated order, he would step back, and view them with an air of child-like complacency.

He was dreadfully distressed because he could not polish his shoes or brush his hair. "If I could but feel clean," he said, "I should not feel so utterly miserable. These awful bristles" — touching his chin — "are horrid." Before leaving his cell to see a visitor he was always careful to conceal, as far as possible, his unshaven chin by means of his red handkerchief. He showed great agitation when a visitor was announced. "For I never know," he said, "what fresh sorrow may not have entered my life, and is, in this

manner, borne to me, so that I may carry it to my cell, and place it in my already overstocked storehouse, which is my heart. My heart is my storehouse of sorrow ! ”

It was during the latter part of the Poet's imprisonment that the order was issued for “ first offenders ” to be kept apart from the other prisoners. They were distinguished by two red stars, one of which was on the jacket and the other worn on the cap, and in consequence were known as “ Star-class men.” The order, not being retrospective, did not apply to the Poet, and in consequence he, like the remainder, had to stand with his face to the wall when any of the “ star-class ” were passing in his vicinity.

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The framers of the order were, no doubt, actuated by the best of motives, but its too literal interpretation caused it to look rather ludicrous. I have seen the Poet having to stand with his face to the wall while a villainous-looking ruffian, who had been convicted for half-killing his poor wife, passed him. In fact, nearly every day he was forced to assume this undignified position, which might have been obviated but for the crass stupidity of officialdom.

In Church the Poet seemed to suffer from *ennui*. He sat in a listless attitude with his elbow resting on the back of his chair, his legs crossed, and gazed dreamily around him and above him.

There were times when he was so

oblivious of his surroundings, so lost in reverie, that it required a friendly "nudge" from one of the "lost sheep" beside him to remind him that a hymn had been given out, and that he must rise and sing, or at least appear to sing, his praises unto God.

When the Chaplain was addressing his shorn and grey-garbed flock, telling them how wicked they all were, and how thankful they should all be that they lived in a Christian country where a paternal Government was as anxious for the welfare of their souls as for the safe-keeping of their miserable bodies; that society did not wish to punish them, although they had erred and sinned against society; that they were undergoing a process of purification;

that their prison was their purgatory, from which they could emerge as pure and spotless as though they had never sinned at all; that if they did so society would meet and welcome them with open arms; that they were the prodigal sons of the community, and that the community, against which they had previously sinned, was fattening calves to feast them, if they would but undertake to return to the fold and become good citizens, — the Poet would smile. But not his usual smile: this was a cynical smile, a disbelieving smile, and often it shadowed despair. “I long to rise in my place, and cry out,” said he, “and tell the poor, disinherited wretches around me that it is not so; to tell them that they are

society's victims, and that society has nothing to offer them but starvation in the streets, or starvation and cruelty in prison!"

I have often wondered why he never did cry out, why he was able to continue, day after day, the dull, slow round of a wearisome existence — an existence of sorrow: sorrow benumbed by its awful monotony; an existence of pain, an existence of death.

But he faithfully obeyed the laws, and conscientiously observed the rules, prescribed by Society for those whom it consigns to the abodes of sorrow. I understand he was punished once for talking. I have no personal knowledge of the circumstance, but I know that it would be almost a miracle for one to

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serve two years' imprisonment without once being reported. Some of the rules are made with no other object than to be broken, so that an excuse may be found for inflicting additional punishment.* However, he could not have been punished by solitary confinement for fifteen days, as has been stated. A governor is not empowered to give more than three days. But twenty-four hours' bread and water is the usual punishment for talking, and, if it be the first offence, the delinquent is generally let off with a caution.

During the period of his incarceration the Poet suffered in health, but

* The writer, it should be remembered, is a prison warder.

he seldom complained to the doctor. He was afraid of doing so lest he should be sent to the sick-ward. He preferred the seclusion of his cell. There he could think aloud without attracting the glances or the undertone comments of the less mobile-minded. There he could be alone — alone with the spectre of his past, alone with his books, alone with his God!

When I entered his cell on a certain bleak, raw morning in early March I found him still in bed. This was unusual, and so I expressed surprise. "I have had a bad night," he explained. "Pains in my inside, which I think must be cramp, and my head seems splitting." I asked whether he had better not report sick. "No,"

he said; "not for anything; I shall be better, perhaps, as the day advances. Come back in a few minutes, when I will be up."

I returned to his cell a few minutes afterwards, and found he was up, but looking so dreadfully ill that I again advised him to see the doctor. He declined, however, saying he would be all right when he had had something warm to drink.

I knew that in the ordinary course of events he would have nothing for at least another hour, so I resolved to find something to give him in the meanwhile myself. I hastened off and warmed up some beef-tea, poured it into a bottle, placed the bottle inside my jacket, and returned towards

his cell. While ascending the staircase the bottle slipped between my shirt and skin. It was very hot. I knew that there was an unoccupied cell on the next landing, and I determined to go there and withdraw the bottle from its painful position. But at that moment a voice called me from the central hall below. I looked down, and saw the Chief Warder. He beckoned me towards him. I went back. He wished to speak concerning a discrepancy in the previous night's muster report. I attempted to elucidate the mystery of two prisoners being in the prison who had no claim on its hospitality. I am afraid I threw but little light on the mystery. I was in frightful agony.

The hot bottle burned against my breast like molten lead. I have said "there are supreme moments in the lives of men." Those were supreme moments to me. I could have cried out in my agony, but dared not. The cold, damp beads of perspiration gathered on my brow; I writhed and twisted in all manners of ways to ease myself of the dreadful thing, but in vain. I could not shift that infernal bottle — try as I might. It lay there against my breast like a hot poultice, but hotter than any poultice that was ever made by a cantankerous mother or by a cantankerous nurse. And the strange thing about it was that the longer it lay the hotter it became. The Chief eyed me curiously. I believe

he thought I had been drinking. I know I was incoherent enough for anything. At last he walked off, and left me, for which I felt truly thankful. I bounded up the iron stairs, and entered the Poet's cell, and, pulling out the burning bottle, I related, amid gasps and imprecations, my awful experience. The Poet smiled while the tale was being told, then laughed — actually laughed. I had never seen him laugh *naturally* before, and, with the same qualification, I may add that I never saw him laugh again.

I felt angry because he laughed. I told him so. I said it was poor reward for all I had undergone to be laughed at, and, so saying, I came out, and

closed the door — I closed it with a bang.

When I took him his breakfast he looked the picture of contrition. He said he wouldn't touch it unless I promised to forgive him.

“Not even the cocoa?” I asked.

“Not even the cocoa,” he replied; and he looked at it longingly.

“Well, rather than starve you, I'll forgive you.”

“And supposing I laugh again?” said he, with a smile.

“I sha'n't forgive you again,” I said.

The following morning he handed me a sheet of foolscap blue official paper. “Here is something,” said he, “which is not of much value now,

but probably may be if you keep it long enough."

I had no opportunity of reading then, but when I had read it I was struck by the power and beauty of its expression. It was headed: "An Apology," and written in his old, original, and racy style. The flow of subtle humour, the wit and charm of the many epigrams, the naiveté contained in some of the personal allusions, were captivating. As a lover of style, I was captivated, and told him so.

"Ah!" said he, "I never thought to resume that style again. I had left it behind me as a thing of the past, but yesterday morning I laughed, which showed my perversity, for I

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really felt sorry for you. I did not mean to laugh: I had vowed never to laugh again. Then I thought it fitting when I had broken one vow to break the other also. I had made two, and I broke both, but now I have made them again. I never intend to laugh, nor do I intend ever again to write anything calculated to produce laughter in others. I am no longer the Sirius of Comedy. I have sworn solemnly to dedicate my life to Tragedy. If I write any more books, it will be to form a library of lamentations. They will be written in a style begotten of sorrow, and in sentences composed in solitude, and punctuated by tears. They will be written exclusively for those who have suffered

or are suffering. I understand them, and they will understand me. I shall be an enigma to the world of Pleasure, but a mouthpiece for the world of Pain."

In conversation the Poet was always perfectly rational. His every action during the day was rational, but, when left to himself in the evening, he underwent a transformation, or, it might be more appropriate to term it, a transfiguration. It was when he was alone in his cell, when the doors were double-locked, when the gas was flickering, when the shadows of night were falling, when all was quiet, when all was dead. The grim and watchful warder moves around with velvety tread. There is

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a still and awful silence — a silence in the warder's slippers, a silence in the cells, a silence in the air. The dark, sombre shadow stops at the door of each living sepulchre, and gazes in; he peers through the aperture of glass, to satisfy himself that the tomb has not become too realistic, that it still contains the living, that none have dared to cheat the law — have dared to baffle Justice.

The view is nearly the same in each: a drab and ghostly figure seated on a stool, finishing the day's task, which will be collected at the hour of eight, or, if he has already finished his work, he sits staring with vacant eyes into vacancy, or looks for consolation in the Book of Common Prayer.

The watching figure glides on, now stops, peers into another cell near the end of the corridor. The cell is marked C.3.3. — it is the cell of the Poet! Around the whole circle of living sepulchres no sight like this! No sight more poignant! No sight more awe-inspiring! No sight more terrible. The Poet is now alone! Alone with the Gods! Alone with the Muse!

He is pacing his cell — one, two, three. Three steps when he has to turn. Three steps and turn again. His hands behind his back, a wrist encircled by a hand, and thus backwards and forwards, to and fro, he goes, his head thrown back, *smiling* — but, Heavens, what a smile!

His eyes — those wonderful eyes! —

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are fairly dancing. Now they are looking towards the ceiling — but far beyond the ceiling, looking even beyond the depths of airy space, looking into the infinite. Now he laughs! What a laugh! Piercing, poignant, bitter — all and more are condensed in that awful laugh. His powerful imagination is at work. Though his body is in fetters his soul is free — for who can chain the soul of a poet? It roams on high and mighty altitudes — high above the haunts of men. Then higher yet, above the silvery clouds, it soars, and finds a resting-place among the pale shadows of the moon.

Then back to earth it comes with one fell stroke, as lightning flashed from heaven — back through the iron

window, back to the prison cell.
Hush! . . . He speaks! . . . He
breathes the sacred name of Mother,
and calls his wife by name! He
sheds a tear, it glistens on his cheek,
when, lo! an angel comes and the
tear evaporates. And thus his life,
whate'er he may have done, was
purged from his account by one hot
tear that trickled from a heart re-
deemed and purified by suffering.
But hark! He speaks again. He
addresses an imaginary visitor, with
hands outstretched towards his little
stool:

“Long, long ago, in boyhood’s days, I had
a fond ambition:
I intended to reform the world, and alter its
condition.

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I raised myself — through Art alone — to a
very high position.

And now, my friend, you see me, a poor
victim of attrition."

He laughs again, and repeats the
last few words: "A victim of attrition.
Piti-less attrition." He turns away,
and resumes his melancholy walk;
then stops once more before his visionary
visitor, and raises his finger. "The
world," he says, with a tinge of egotism,
"is not so solid after all. I can shake
it with an epigram and convulse it
with a song."

He laughs once more, then sinks
upon the prison stool, and bows his
head. And here we leave him to think
his thoughts alone — Alone!

Let no one mock those nightly

scenes, and say the Poet was not sincere. In prison he was the very soul of sincerity — and remember, no man can wear a mask in prison. You may deceive the governor, you may deceive the chaplain, you may deceive the doctor, but you cannot deceive the warder. His eye is upon you when no other eye sees you, during your hours of sleep as well as during your hours of wakefulness.

What the Poet was before he went to prison I care not. What he may have been after he left prison I know not. One thing I know, however, that while in prison he lived the life of a saint, or as near that holy state as poor mortal can ever hope to attain.

His gentle smile of sweet serenity

was something to remember. It must have been a smile like this that Bunyan wore as he lay in Bedford Gaol dreaming his wonderful dreams. It must have been a similar smile that illumined the noble face of St. Francis of Assisi when he spoke of "his brother the wind and his sister the rain."

Had Hugo been an artist with the brush as he was artist with the pen he would have depicted such a smile as shimmering over the features of the good bishop when he told his great white lie to save poor Jean Valjean. And, who can say that the Prince of Peace Himself would have considered such a smile unworthy of His countenance as He uttered the sweet words of invitation to the little

children whom the disciples wished to keep away? One can remember such a smile although one's pen fails to describe its sweetness, as it fails to describe the sweet perfume of the rose. It was a smile of resignation, a smile of benevolence, a smile of innocence, a smile of love.

Farewell, brave heart! May your sleep be as peaceful as your smile. May the angels hover around your tomb in death as they hovered around your tomb in life. And, had you been destitute of every other attribute that goes to make the perfect man, that smile alone would have served you as your passport through the gates of Paradise and onwards to the Great White Throne!

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Farewell! I have kept my promise. I have remembered you during all the years that have intervened since that memorable day we shook hands and parted in your cold and cheerless cell. You asked me to think of you sometimes. I have thought of you always; scarcely one single day has passed since then that I have not thought of you — you who were at once my prisoner and my friend.

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